

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.*

Dear friends, as you probably know, I have never done a sermon before. It is certainly a challenge, and I will try my best! In doing so, I thought that I would try to let the texts speak for themselves, the readings and the psalm. What do the texts have in common?

I have found **three aspects**. The **first one** is an originally bad situation. Or a challenging situation, so to speak, if you want to express it more positively. Like my trying to write a sermon, for example, but a little more existential than that. And we all know these existential situations. Maybe, you are in the very middle of one, right now.

Because, sometimes, in life, we lose our way. Suddenly, we find ourselves in a barren land, like in a desert. And we don't know which way to turn. Wherever we look, there's simply more desert. No way out to be seen. And then we wonder – how did we get there? Where did we take a wrong turn? Or did it really have to end up like that, and the desert is no fault of ours?

Now, I'll be going through the readings. There are quite a lot of them, actually. I'll start with the prophet Hosea (**Hosea 5:15-6:6**). He lived and preached in the eighth century before Christ. And he spoke to a people that was certainly in such an existential situation: God himself had torn them, Hosea says. He had struck them down. God had hewn and killed them, even. And then, God had gone – the Lord has returned to his place – wherever this place might be. He is far away now.

**Psalm 50:7-15**, as well, paints a dreary picture. The people bring sacrifices, like we do in life – we think we are doing our best, we try to do all we can – but God will not accept our sacrifices.

God says: I will take no bull out of your house, nor he-goat out of your folds. But why? What have we done wrong?

Also in the gospel, there's people in need. The leader of the synagogue has just lost his beloved daughter. The suffering woman has been ill for twelve years. And the tax-collector has lost his place in society.

And, finally, Paul (**Romans 4:13-25**) speaks about God's wrath. But how can there be wrath? Why does God punish us? Why doesn't he help us, instead? In our isolation? In our disorientation? In our loneliness? In our despair? In our sickness? In our deadness, even? Maybe not properly dead, but with dead and numb emotions? In our dreadful fear? Our distress? Like the crowd in Matthew, in the house of the dead girl, we make a lot of noise in our pain.

But then: In comes Jesus. He silences the noise and creates peace and quiet all around. And then, he raises the girl from the dead. But how does this come about?

This, I think, is the **second aspect** that our four texts have in common: There is not only darkness, but there is light. There is despair, but there is hope. There is transgression, but there is righteousness. There is disorientation, but there is also the way. How do we get to the other side? What do the texts say?

In Hosea, God has gone back to his place – wherever this place might be. Where is it, then?

We must look for it! That's what God wants us to do. We must seek him. We must return to him. We might have transgressed – but now, we must get back on the right track. And this, we can only achieve by finding him.

And we must do so, steadily. Our love must not be like a morning cloud, Hosea says. It must not go away early like the dew. No, we must keep on walking. We must learn and grow in our knowledge of God. We must never lose focus of our goal.

There's nothing wrong in bringing sacrifices. But they are only means to an end. Our end must be love. Steadfast love. God is not hungry. But our fellow humans might be. This goal should always be in front of us. For this is, where we will find God. This is where his dwelling is. This is how we can be close to God.

The next thing is: God wants us to call on him. Call upon me in the day of trouble, says the psalm.

And he wants our thanksgiving – even in times of trouble. You might also have experienced that there is always something to thank for, in whatever situation, and you feel better when you do. Some people have had the experience that in the worst of times God can also feel the closest.

And the psalm asks us to fulfil our vows to God Most High. This might mean that we should be true to ourselves and to God. Again, we must not give up. We must keep on walking. We must keep our goal in mind, steadfast love, and we must stay focused on it. We must keep our promises to ourselves and to God.

And for that, we must keep hope up. Hope against hope, even. Faith is the word here. We should be like Abraham, says Paul: Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations'. No distrust made him waver, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God. Our faith is our righteousness, says Paul, our faith in God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Jesus, finally, draws on that passage in Hosea when he says: Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy, not sacrifice. But what does it mean? In the story in **Matthew 9:9-13; 18-26**), the people criticise Jesus – why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners? But Jesus answers: Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick.

And Matthew repents: When Jesus calls him, Matthew says yes and follows – and becomes one of the twelve.

The **third aspect** these texts have in common, I think, is how they depict what happens if we do follow Jesus – like Matthew, like the suffering woman, like the leader of the synagogue. If we believe in God like Abraham did. If we return to God the way the psalmist and Hosea ask us to do: God will heal us. God will bind us up. After two days will he revive us; in the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him – like God did with Jesus, actually.

And we will be more in the know – we won't be so disoriented, anymore, but we might actually know where we're going. We will be able to rely on God – Hosea says: his appearing is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth. I will deliver you and you shall honour me, says the psalm. Abraham and Sara are no longer childless. And when we are justified by faith we can get well. We can take heart. We can heal and be healed.

So, in the end, we can rise like the girl – even when it seemed like death, we are really alive. **Amen**